

It's a Secret: The Transformation of Privacy and Publicity into Engaged Secrecy

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Introduction

In the post Snowden-leaks and revelation that the NSA has been spying on the American citizens, there is a general outrage that our privacy has been violated. However, the breakdown of what is protected privacy and what is not is not as simple as it appears. With the rise of technologies of surveillance and the mass online gathering, the relation between the public and the private has changed dramatically. While secrecy within governments is nothing new, the exposure of the acts of the NSA and the rise of technologies of mass surveillance has changed not only our understanding of privacy, but of political action and agency. Within the liberal dichotomy of public/private, there is no longer a space of privacy, but only decisions of privacy. What was meant to be invisible to other individuals and institutions, namely the acts within household and activities of exclusivity no longer hold up against liberal demands for publicity and information dissemination.

I argue that the realm of privacy and public, and the relation between them are transforming into a realm of political secrecy; or, the deliberate intention to keep information out of sight. We no longer live in a realm of either/or (public or private), but, instead, in a emerging area in which politics and secrecy blend together to form new political actors, who co-opt the tactics of the state and arguments for secrecy in order to attack those very same institutions that withhold, or attempt to withhold information from the public. Furthermore, the environment and the acts of the hacktivist group, Anonymous, are examples of the use of the realm of the secret to engage in acts of politics while still maintaining a code of

secrecy and anonymity. They are forced to co-opt the tactics of state agencies not to keep all their information private, but in order to actually engage in politics. No longer does one choose to enter into a public or political sphere by merely exiting the isolation of their private domain. While hackers and hacktivists have utilized the anonymity that the digital realm provides, Anonymous and its members take that anonymity further when they engage in political protests and demonstrations by keeping their identity a secret with the use of masks. In the end, they wish for people to know they are members or supporters of Anonymous, but without having us know who they are. Their political agency is within this new realm of secrecy.

Public / Private Dichotomies

What is privacy? And, what makes it so different from the public and publicity? While the dichotomy is used often within political theory and discourse, the split between the two spaces or realms is not as simple as it appears. There are multiple views on what actually is private and what is public; with multiple overlaps and intersections, it becomes clear that the boundaries around these two ideas is anything but exclusive.¹ In order to express the difference, I am using the four major models of the private and the public argued by Weintraub and rearticulated by Papacharassi. Each model provides different conceptualizations and understandings of the dichotomy, depending on what political and social theoretical position one is advocating. These models are: 1) liberal-economic; 2) Classic/republican-virtue; 3) sociability; 4) feminist/ domestic-public. Obviously, there are more than these four perspectives, and within each there are a variety of distinctions that I cannot afford to explore in this paper. Instead, I will briefly describe each in order

¹ Weintraub, 2.

to give the reader a basic understanding of the differences and similarities between each model in order to unpack the modern liberal dichotomy.

The Liberal-economic model can be understood as the most widely used and structurally and culturally reinforced distinction. This model draws the line between public and private as a matter of state/administrative actions versus market forces; in other words, what the state can do and where it ought to be allowed to do. This distinction has its basis in neoclassical economics and classic liberal theories (e.g. Hobbes, Locke, Smith, Bentham).² The distinction is based on the rise of the validity of the self-interested individual, who is naturally rational when it comes to private matters and contracts, while the state is perceived as an irrational and invasive but necessary agent to guide and manipulate societal structures and people's self-interested goals.³ Within this strict dichotomy, ultimately, lies arguments about jurisdiction; specifically, jurisprudence (i.e. a right to privacy and invasion of privacy), but also public sector versus private sector and which is better suited at creating and distributing good to the masses.

In the classical/republican-virtue model, like the liberal-economic, public means political; however, unlike the liberal-economic mode, political does not refer the state and state action, but rather, to the collective and deliberative decisions and actions of citizens acting in concert.⁴ This model harkens back to the Greek and Roman ideals of politics, in which the private tends to be associated with the privacy of the four walls of household

² Papacharissi, 31.

³ Weintraub, 8-9; Fairfield, 4 - 5

⁴ Weintraub; 11.

separated physically and conceptually from the polis.⁵ Within this dichotomy occurs the notion of a civil society as a distinct sphere from the state and the market⁶; in other words, theorists are more concerned with the sovereignty people have in public and their actions as distinct people coming together to actively engage with one another and to act as a community.⁷

The sociability, of sociological model reflects the complexity and uncertainty in the public realm, as opposed to the mastery one has within the private, familial realm. Unlike the republican model, civil society is not about solidarity of community and citizenship, but it is not the private, rational choices of individuals as theorized in the liberal-economic model either. Alternatively, the public is about social behaviors of individual within a diverse and chaotic setting, where people have impersonal association as oppose to intimate relations.⁸ In other words, the public is opposed to the private in that the private is the realm of family and domesticity, in which we have a growing dependence on because of the ever-increasing bureaucratic and impersonal public spaces of modern life.⁹

The feminist model problematizes the seemingly neutral terminology of private and public. Feminist scholars tend to label the two spheres as domestic/public. While this terminology is similar to what is reflected in the classical model (the private as the home/family and the public as the political polis), with domestic being naturally apolitical and therefore, unworthy of debate or consideration, feminist argue that this

⁵ Arendt [1998].

⁶ Weintraub, 15.

⁷ Papacharissi, 32.

⁸ Weintraub, 20 & 26.

⁹ Papacharissi, 33-34.

realm has been the forced home of the unseen female and the abuses that do take place within it.¹⁰ In other words, the public/private dichotomy is a tool of ideology (in the Marxist sense) and oppression, in which the public is meant to be masculine and productive, while the private is feminine and nonproductive (and therefore, out of sight for market forces and off-limits for the law).¹¹

While these models do not exhaust the possible understandings of the public/private dichotomy, they do provide an overview of preferences toward and significance of one realm over the other. As Weintraub argues, the first two models (liberal and republican) prioritize the public over the private by defining the public and its significance and boundaries, leaving the private as a “residual category” with that which is left out.¹² This gives an unneeded point of validity to the feminist argument that the private is the leftover realm for the female, which is a reason why feminist scholars reprioritize the dichotomy and focus on the private firstly. However, what all these models expose is the complexity of the dichotomy and that a single model seldom exists in isolation.

Privacy is the Liberal State

Because there are multiple models and understandings of the reasons for and interactions between the public and the private, how is one to get a clear understanding of privacy, if there is so much interdependence with, while simultaneously being constructed as the opposite of public? One must step back and find the broad characteristics that each understanding of privacy entails. A main property of privacy is

¹⁰ Weintraub, 28 – 29.

¹¹ Papacharissi, 34.

¹² Weintraub, 28.

the notion of visibility, or, more correctly, the option to be out of sight of others; to be hidden or withdrawn or to be secluded from the public collective.¹³ However, when comparing the value of privacy in the liberal model versus that of the classical, the significance of a space and realm of privacy depends not only on the affect it has on an individual, but the people, as political agents, as well. Having a space where one can be ‘invisible’ can lead to isolation, which, depending on one’s understanding and perspective, can be more desirable and beneficial. The development of liberal conceptions of privacy and publicity morphed the values assorted with privacy and publicity. Whereas, for example, in the classical dichotomy, as Arendt argues, a private sphere is necessary, but not idealized, because it is a space of deprivation, away from others and the intimacy of political interaction¹⁴. However, in the liberal understanding privacy is a space for intimacy and for a space for the autonomous individual; having a space for privacy allows for the possibility to get away from others—either in a physical/proximal sense and/or in a legal sense.¹⁵ In the cases of the former, privacy was necessary because people needed to fulfill and satisfy the apolitical necessities of life, while in the case of the latter, privacy is valued because of the rise of the autonomous individual and the need to protect him from collective/majoritarian actions—in other words, a space to get away from the state.

However, when one begins to analyze this liberal value of privacy and the theoretical foundations of liberal politics, a key, yet paradoxical, relational characteristic is uncovered. Within the liberal dichotomy, there is a preferred desire for privacy, while

¹³ Elshtain, 167. Weintraub, 5; Wolfe, 183; Holtzman, 4.

¹⁴ Arendt, 38.

¹⁵ Fairfield, 6; Wacks, 34 – 35.

simultaneously desire for information and publicity. Jodi Dean gets to the center of this paradox. She points out that within social contract theories there is an underlying demand for the dissemination of all information within the public. For Dean, liberalism is founded on the argument that merely creating a mass public realm of information will somehow lead to the true democracy and social justice¹⁶; in other words, without transparency and openness, then politics (in this sense, the state) cannot be considered open to democracy.¹⁷ The desire for information and the value placed on privacy results in people being pulled in two opposing direction—one toward a constant visibility in public, while the other places value on a need for privacy.

What kind of privacy is this? How can we be expected to project information about ourselves, while at the same time, expect to be left alone? The value placed on privacy has given rise to legal protection and a ‘right to privacy. In liberal democracy, private spaces must be protected legally from the gaze of other people and institutions. In the United States context, Brandies and Warren give a simple summary of what a right to privacy means in their famous 1890 article, which is a “right to be let alone.”¹⁸ However, Wacks points out that being left alone does not only mean a physical isolation from others. He makes distinction that is key in understanding how the liberal paradox of privacy and publicity, and the effects of spying and secret surveillance, by breaking down privacy as a value for decision-making (how do I choose to live my life when it does not affect others) and as a value for informational privacy (what I want others to know about

¹⁶ Dean [2002]

¹⁷ Horn, 112.

¹⁸ Warren and Brandeis, 193.

me).¹⁹ An example of the former would be the protection of abortion rights based on an autonomous woman's right to privacy (e.g. a woman's right to choose), while the latter would be keeping my personal information private (e.g. the fact that the woman had an abortion). He argues that while there is a value to protecting decisional privacy, violations of and a lack of protection toward informational privacy tends to destroy the space and sphere of privacy.²⁰ Information that one wishes to keep out of sight of others not only means they keep this information in a physical space that is detached from others (though this is an important aspect), but even when they are in public spaces privacy still exists. He claims that legal protections today tend to protect decisional privacy, which is based on what one chooses to do with their life, as an autonomous agent, and should not be infringed by either another individual or the collective.²¹ In other words, he finds that liberal legal protection, while valuing privacy, focuses too much on abstractions of privacy and choices rather than the spaces of privacy and violations of intrusion and divulging information; that liberalism cannot truly protect information privacy because everyone is expected to give their information into the public realm.

The liberal model sets up a tension within the public/private dichotomy. No longer are each equally opposed, yet interrelated and dependent on one another. Rather, publicity is such a strong force that privacy, while still valued, is transformed into a small and loosely protect realm. The split in privacy that Wacks explains (decisional and informational) helps maintain the tension between informational dissemination and

¹⁹ Wacks, xi.

²⁰ Wacks, 43.

²¹ Wacks, xi.

protection of privacy. However, in order to do this, in the end, the liberal model sets the foundation for the rise of the secret because people are expected to inform everyone about who they are and what they are doing. One is allowed to make private decisions, or decisions in private, but they are expected to divulge what decision they made. With such a high expectation for information, people within a liberal model are no longer expected to have secrets²², because secrets are the antithesis to an open, liberal democracy.

Privacy and Secrecy—Where does one end and the other begin?

Informational privacy is what is at risk in the new digital age and has given rise to the realm of the secret as not only a space of secrecy but also a mindset of secrecy. Secrecy and privacy are related; secrecy can be defined as the most inner realm of a person's life.²³ We may interact with others and expect these situations to be private, in that even though I talk with a friend in a public place, I expect the conversation to be just between me and my friend and not the others around me. This is different from secrecy because the expectation that the conversation is private is based on that others may hear the conversation and information but they are not meant to engage or interact with me, my friend, or the information we divulge. This realm of secrecy takes on characteristics of its own and should be distinguished from a secret. Again, I may divulge a secret to my friend with the expectation that all others do not engage with us or eavesdrop. While a secret may be something like a family recipe or techniques, they are not kept in a realm of secrecy because any person may possess the same techniques or acquire the ingredients and instructions necessary to make the dish in the recipe. Secrecy, on the other hand, like

²² Dean [2002], 1.

²³ Payton and Claypoole, 1; Horn, 112.

privacy and publicity, is not a specific thing. Instead, it is characterized as a shroud of concealment. Bok defined keeping a secret from someone as “to block information about it or evidence of it from reaching that person, and to do so intentionally.”²⁴ What is key about this definition, and what brings it into the liberal dichotomy, is not the motives but the *agency* needed in order to conceal secrets. It is the intention to deprive a certain audience of access to certain information.²⁵

In the context of the liberal dichotomy, secrecy becomes the counter to publicity. While there is a decisional privacy, it is informational secrecy that is the counter to the realm of publicity. One is expected to deliver information, and those who do not become associated with secrecy—intentionally hiding information for the public audience. Dean argues that secrecy is what makes the public, “secrecy generates the very sense of a public it presupposes. The secret designates that which is desired to be known, that which hasn’t yet been disclosed.”²⁶ We live in an era in which we expect total disclosure; in which the public realm is always expecting more disclosure. This expectation causes a double bind upon people. On the one hand, people live in an environment of total information dissemination and the creation of a hyper-public in which there is less and less public spaces for gathering, while, on the other hand, there is the creation of more and more spaces for storage of information. In this environment, secrecy only exists for those who control the method of gathering and the storage of information. Secrecy within individual privacy is supposed to be protected (a right to secrecy within a right to privacy), while the state (as a public institution) is meant to be open and without secrets.

²⁴ Bok, 5-6.

²⁵ Vermier, 169 & 176.

²⁶ Dean [2002], 10.

However, what we experience is quite the opposite. Individuals disclose, while powerful institutions intentionally conceal not only what information they gathering, but how they are gathering that information or, in the case of NSA, that they are even gathering information in the first place).

Information Dissemination and Gathering and its consequences

The expectation for information helps explain the role of new technologies of information dissemination and information gathering. The rise of digital technologies allows us to communicate with more people and with more ease than ever before. People now have the ability to create a vastly open society, where all can be informed and have the power to inform, to gather information on an issue and to present one's opinion on a matter. In other words, we live under the condition for a huge and diverse public realm. These technologies create conditions in which informational privacy is in no need of protection because we are freely choosing to deliver our information to others in the vast digital publicity. The result of this is that, from the bottom, people, while still have personal information, do not hesitate to make that information public. Examples of this attitude are seen in the popularity of social networking sites, like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram. This vast openness and inclusion is an ideal of liberal democracy; if we are all allowed to included, then the public sphere *will* lead to true democracy and justice. But, as Dean argues, this is merely a ruse; the blatant value of publicity does not mean that it will naturally lead to a truly open and just society because it does not mean we can and will actually confront injustices and material power relations.²⁷ Openness for the sake of openness does not lead to action, but rather to an endless cycle of communication

²⁷ Dean [2002] & [2009].

and a hyper-public. The consequence of this larger public is not political change but a shrinking private realm. The protection of a right to privacy, a right to be left alone, is not infringed in the cases of information dissemination because we choose to make private information public and known—to make it visible—and as a consequence, our legal protection is secure, but our understanding of privacy, and spaces of privacy are shrinking. As Wacks puts it, we tend to think of privacy as a right and not a condition of being in private.²⁸ What he means by this is that knowing that the place or situation we are in is safe, and that we can speak freely without worrying about our information being spread and disseminated. What Wacks is exposing is that, while we choose at certain moments to divulge information, we should expect a place or realm for informational and personal privacy. This expectation leads to the other end of information and privacy, the collecting, storing, and study of information.

With the rise of technological devices of surveillance, we are arriving at a point when methods of controlling privacy and information dissemination for individuals and groups are becoming outdated. While people tend to disseminate their information, on the other end is information gathering from the top institutions—political, commercial, or clandestine. Multiple examples of this include biometrics on our iPhones, club cards that record our shopping history, Google cars documenting every nook of public spaces, just to name a few of the open sources of gathering. Information and communication technologies (ICTs) allow for a constant state of surveillance. For “the observation, recording and categorization of information about people, processes and institutions. ... for the collection of information, its storage, examination and—as a rule—its

²⁸ Wacks, 43.

transmission.”²⁹ Technology has allowed for intrusion into privacy beyond mere physical intrusion and into *abstract encroachments*—like wiretapping or monitoring internet traffic.³⁰ What we have learned is that being watched does not come from the Orwellian Big Brother or from a singular Panopticon, but from a network of eyes and ears.³¹ In other words, it is not just the government we must think about when discussing surveillance, but multiple institutions that monitor our interactions—in both physical and digital spaces. We are living in the era of “Big Data”, in which institutions collect millions of facts about individuals in order to predict further behavior, whether shopping trends or criminal behavior.³² Examples of this are, on the corporate/commercial side, Google monitoring our search history and online activities in order to provide better suited advertisements and personalized searching, or, on the governmental side, the NSA or CIA engaging in *deep packet sniffing*³³, or intercepting cell-phone or internet calls, to the Library of Congress and National Archives Records Administration storing every tweet made.³⁴

While there is not a single source for all the surveillance, the era of Big Data and mass information gathering for the sake of security has a disciplinary effect on people. What is important about the panopticon is that it is less about actually being watched, but about the belief of being watched that is the purpose of the device. This effect is important for the understanding of the rise of secrecy. The expectation of publicity in

²⁹ Ball, et al, 1.

³⁰ Holtzman, 99.

³¹ Ball, et al. 6-7; Lyon, 20.

³² Payton and Claypoole, 7 & 37.

³³ This is the practice of “reviewing packets of information coming across the Internet to determine the type of content [without necessarily directly seeing the message] within the packets”. (Payton and Claypoole, 42).

³⁴ Alabaster, Jay, “Library of Congress Saves 500 million Tweets per Day in Archives.” In *Computerworld*, January 8, 2013 (cited from Payton and Claypoole, 43).

liberal society leaves little room for privacy, but within the era of Big Data and spying, privacy becomes even smaller, leaving only room for secrecy. Bringing this back to the notion of state secrecy mentioned above, with the discovery of the NSA spying practice, people now know that they are targets of spying; that the information they have kept out of public is no longer safe. In other words, their private telephone conversation is no longer private; it is open to the eyes and ears of state authority. With this in mind, while Foucault argued that discipline would become self-enforced with the rise of surveillance, when this is coupled with the liberal desire for openness and information dissemination, people must become disciplined in keeping things a secret—keeping strict control of their information and when and how and to whom it is spread. In other words, those who wish to keep their activities private have no choice but to behave like the very institutions that are gathering their information; peoples and associations activities must exist in a realm of secrecy.

State Secrecy

The rise of the secret is dependent upon the paradox of liberal privacy and publicity. As discussed above, information is a necessary component of a healthy democracy; however, what does access to information mean in regards to the state (here, in the liberal sense, the state represents a public arena)? In other words what is secrecy at the state level, or state secrecy? Moynihan defines state secrecy as a form of *regulation*, and in regards to foreign affairs it regulates how a citizen may act, while in domestic affairs (and more important to this project) the state and government prescribes what

citizens may know.³⁵ However, it must go further than that. Regulations imply that the regulation must be known—that we, as citizens, know that we are not allowed to know. State secrecy goes further than open regulations; “The very essence of state secrecy is to operate unobserved, hence it is the prerogative of power to withhold certain issues from debate, avoid justifications and instead take care of business behind closed doors.”³⁶ State secrecy drives to the heart of the liberal dichotomy; how are we to know what we know is all there is to know? On the one hand, how can a liberal state operate in a realm of secrecy? While on the other hand, how can a state operate effectively without secrecy?; or, put differently how can a state operate effectively without prescribing that openness and transparency has a limit? What happens with state secrecy under liberalism is that the standards and morals placed upon privacy and information are used to judge the state and politics. Individuals are allowed privacy and a core of secrecy, but the state and public politics must operate without that privacy.³⁷ Obviously, this deepens the paradox of the liberal dichotomy when we view information dissemination and gathering as a key feature of liberal politics. While people are meant to have privacy, they willfully give away features of their everyday life, while the state and public matters are meant to stay out of sight.

One of the effects of this paradox is, for Horn a sense of paranoia, in which citizens are convinced that the state always has information hidden out of sight—which is always a criminal or conspiratorial element—and the only solution is a state of total transparency. She uses WikiLeaks and Julian Assange as an example of this state of paranoia and his adamant desire for total transparency. For Assange, WikiLeaks is a tool

³⁵ Moynihan, 59.

³⁶ Horn, 107.

³⁷ Horn, 112.

to disrupt what he refers to as “collaborative secrecy”; to bring out state criminal activities into the light of day—to bring them to the gaze of publicity.³⁸ What this attitude implies about state secrecy is, the only things worth keeping secret are the criminal behaviors of the state. However, states need secrecy to function, and the information and activities they keep out of the eyes of the public may not be criminal and the gaze of the general public may not even be the intended target of secrecy. States may need to keep certain information secret in order to keep it from the eyes of the enemy and the only way to secure it is, to keep it away from everyone outside of the state institution or agency. However, when one examines the Edward Snowden leaks and the activities of the NSA over the past decade, it seems to confirm the general paranoia of Assange and the need for leakers.

While there are valid reasons to keep certain information private and secret (for individual, group, or institutions), the NSA’s spying activities, because of their general scope³⁹, take secrecy to a new level. As mentioned above, people tend to give out their information during the routines of their everyday activities (in a way, tacitly divulging information is a routine), but the NSA takes this a step further because 1) it is doing it in the name of security⁴⁰ and 2) it is doing it in secret (in that, we are not meant to know they are doing it). The exposure of *PRISM* program and *Sigint* (Signal Intelligence) program bring to light NSA tactics of monitoring communication between a variety of sources—such as, emails and cell phones—and augment that communication with

³⁸ Horn, 119.

³⁹ No one seems to be off-limits from the gaze of CIA and NSA spying. The Snowden Leaks exposed us to the idea that the NSA is not only aiming its gaze inward towards citizens, but that it also does not seem to discriminate on whose information gets caught in its net. In other words, they are not spying solely on suspected terrorists, but instead, using spying to find potential evidence on anyone before they are openly suspected of terrorism. In addition, the revelation that the CIA has been spying on Congresspersons involved in the investigation of CIA’s tactic of torturing people for information.

⁴⁰ Ball, et al.

information from Facebook profiles, bank codes, GPS location information to get a complete picture of who they are spying on. While some of these sources of information are meant to be private (in that they are intended for a certain audience [such as bank information or personal emails]), in order to gather information and communication records, the NSA program has undermined online security by developing decryption programs or influencing the design of programs in order to break encryption.⁴¹ While the former method gathered private information, the latter purposely seeks out information that is meant to be a secret. And, if one wished to now if the NSA has any information on them, they may submit a Freedom of Information (FOIA) request⁴². However, the FOIA can be sidestepped through a Glomar Response, or, as it is more commonly known, the NSA will “neither confirm nor deny” that they have any information on you. The government does not confirm that it does have this information, while, simultaneously, it also does not deny that this information may exist, or that it is even spying. The reason for this response is, by affirming that the information exists (or doesn’t) itself is a form of divulging secret information.⁴³ The agency does not wish to officially acknowledge that this information even exists, even if the public knows the information or agency’s activities did happen, the agency can still refuse to officially acknowledge that it does (e.g. the PRISM program is in the public, but not officially acknowledged).⁴⁴ What results from this is that the dissemination of individual’s information is neither secretly gathered nor secretly protected; the Glomar response adds secrecy upon secrecy.

⁴¹ Ball, et al.

⁴² In the aftermath of the Snowden Leak, FOIA request to the NSA spiked over 1000%. (Lennard, http://www.salon.com/2013/10/07/nsa_leaks_prompt_1000_foia_request_spike/; Leopald, <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2014/4/8/nsa-after-snowden.html>)

⁴³ Wessler, 1182

⁴⁴ Becker, 683.

So, what are the consequences of such sophisticated forms of information gathering and such secrecy about it being gathered? What makes this any different than CCTV camera? In one area, which has been thoroughly researched, the consequence of surveillance, in reference to Foucault, is for the sake of discipline. Like the Panopticon, in which one does not know if they are actually being watched, the Glomar response provides a barricade between the one in front of the camera and the potential one watching. It is not as important that one knows they are being watched, as it is that they *believe* they are being watched.⁴⁵ In this case, that we believe we are being spied on—that our Internet traffic, cell phone usage, GPS units, and encrypted files are being monitored and assessed. Additionally, that we believe we are being watched for reasons of national security.⁴⁶ Surveillance, and its disciplinary effects, at first, takes the control of disclosure away from the individual person and in its place creates an image of the autonomous person based on these moments of surveillance. Businesses take your actions and information to better suit your needs, but in reality, they cause you to better fit into the image of you they think you are. This results in the second effect, the normalizing effect. When people are being watched, especially by security forces, they begin to behave in a manner that suits the forces believed to be watching them—one engages in self-disciplining.⁴⁷ In the context of mass surveillance and the Snowden Leaks, citizens begin to change their behavior to avoid situations that may bring them into a risk profile. If one want to know if she is a target of NSA spying, even if she submit a FOIA request,

⁴⁵ Wacks, 2.

⁴⁶ It is one thing to believe our activities are being monitored and stored as consumers (e.g. Google or Amazon customizing searches), because we all know and accept we are consumers; there is no secret there. However, the potential of being monitored because you may be a security threat or connected (however indirectly) to a security threat changes the entire dynamic of surveillance.

⁴⁷ Lyon, 20.

she may receive a Glomar response, which only adds to her paranoia. However, there is another effect; a cooptation of clandestine activities. But what about those who believe they are being watch, or will be watched, but do not normalize their behavior in order to fit into a manageable population? What about those who engage in a form of self-discipline that mimics the secrecy of the state? What about groups who embrace secrecy as a form of political actions? Who cause disruption through utilizing the same secrecy tactics as state agencies? I believe we are seeing a rise of secrecy as a political tool and a political necessity. In other words, political actors are taking the realm of privacy as the foundation for their political actions and subversion.

Anonymous and Political Engaged Secrecy

We witness this clandestine political actor not just in WikiLeaks, but in the hacktivism of Anonymous.⁴⁸ Hackers are prime products of the paradox of the liberal dichotomy. Hackers who follow the hacker ethic hack for the sake of opening doors and pathways to information.⁴⁹ Hacktivist and hacker groups believe that certain information cannot be off-limits, while other information is made readily available or collected in secret. Hacktivists utilize clandestine nature of digital hacking to advance informational/political goals and highlight a concern for the monitoring of those in social/political positions of power.⁵⁰ Hacking becomes an alternative form of information gathering and dissemination that exists outside the state sanctioned sources;

⁴⁸ Another alternative (yet, decreasingly subversive) actor, who engages in secrecy as a force for political action is the graffiti artist, Banksy. Banksy utilizes and maintains the absence of identifiable information in order to engage in his acts of graffiti and mischievous political art/pieces in peace. When he appears in videos, his face is blacked out and his voice is distorted, so that all one can tell from it is that he is a he and English (which everyone already knew). By keeping his identity a secret, he is able to freely live a life outside of his graffiti persona. In public he is *Banksy*, while his private he is *Joe Doe*.

⁴⁹ Still, doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5210%2Ffm.v10i9.1274>

⁵⁰ Manion, et al., 14.

hence, its threatening label of cyber terrorism. But furthermore, collective hacking exposes the ability of diversity to come together for a single and temporary goal.

When examining the actions of Anonymous, the use of secrecy is obvious. Even the name “anonymous” itself reflects a sense of secrecy. This is different than secret societies, in that even members do not wish to know the identities of other members, even to the degree of sex or age. The roots of the Anonymous group and idea of anonymity are in 4chan website a /b/ forum and the site’s “Forced-Anon” policy and the idea of anonymity leading to better discussions and ideas, free of interference of egos and vanity.⁵¹ While on the one hand, the anonymity of the organization helps it appear as a horizontal collective, with a hive mind, there is more to the use of anonymity than collective mentality. On the other hand, anonymity reflects the general understanding that when one engages in online activities, especially politically minded protests and (now notorious) Distributed Denial of Service (DDOS) attacks, people must assume they are being monitored or traced. And, instead of normalizing their behavior to fit the mold of authority, groups like Anonymous embrace the value of secrecy as a political tool for engagement. When becoming a member, it [Anonymous] is absolutely aware of the needs for secrecy and security when engaging in its activities. While Anonymous did not start out as a political motivated collective, since 2010 (and the attacks on MasterCard and PayPal in defense of WikiLeaks), it has streamlined the means for online/virtual sit-ins and virtual civil disobedience. This allows those who are not tech savvy to still engage in political action and hacktivism without being “hackers”.⁵² The group points out the utility of Virtual Private Networks (VPN) and the need for encryption when being

⁵¹ Olson, 28.

⁵² Beyer, 145.

on the web. As if knowing you will be in the gaze, they provide digital masks in order to prevent one's identity and information from being discovered as quickly as it would otherwise. In other words, Anonymous utilizes secrecy in order to follow through on their political, hacker agenda.

While anonymity can be a default norm for online activity, members of Anonymous, or those who support the cause, take their political activities out of the digital realm and into the streets. However, they do not come as disclosed individuals; even in public protests, people wear the Guy Fawkes mask not only as a symbol of political solidarity, but as a way of maintaining anonymity outside of the digital world,⁵³ to maintain secrecy and keep guarded identifiable information. Maintaining one's identity a secret in a public space is increasingly difficult (e.g. all the CCTV cameras and law enforcement typically present at mass gatherings). While the masks help keep them safe because of their illegal online activities, it seems better to not wear the masks in public; to disassociate oneself from Anonymous while in public. In other words, they could have an online anonymity *and* a public anonymity as another member in a large crowd. By wearing the masks, members stand out and draw attention to who they are—they are Anonymous and that is all one gets to know. They choose not to hide, but to embrace secrecy.

There is something telling about this choice. Anonymous has flipped the roles of privacy and public (like Banksy), members enter into public as secret agents and actors—secrecy is my public identity. Like Arendt discusses, when one engages in politics, they metaphorically birth themselves into the political world, as a separate individual from

⁵³ Olson, 83.

others, but also as different person than whom they are in private.⁵⁴ Anonymous does just that; however, without revealing who they are in private. Like a superhero, their true identity is who they are in the costume (or, with the mask on), not who they are without the costume (or, without the mask).⁵⁵ Groups like Anonymous do not use their online presence, while in the privacy of their homes (or wherever), only to engage in political activism. They help blur the line between what is private and what is public and where the political realm ceases. Instead, they come out of their private places and digital realm, but wearing masks and with distorted voices, to mobilize others into political action and it has worked.⁵⁶

Conclusion

People seem to embrace the secrecy and the masks while simultaneously protesting the use of secrecy of government and commercial agencies. In the end, the paradoxical behavior only raises further questions about contemporary politics and the relation between state secrecy and activist secrecy. Is this utilization of secrecy really a tool for political engagement? Can one trust a group that refuses to divulge its membership and lacks a central leadership, which results in multiple and varied activities and targets, really be considered a political group?

While the use of secrecy in the past has been a tool for revolutionary parties, who wish not be found out by the state, the contemporary use of secrecy may be a trend that is not necessarily revolutionary or for revolutionary purposes; however, it is utilized by

⁵⁴ Arendt, 7-9

⁵⁵ For example, Superman is the public figure and the true self, while Clark Kent is merely a lie in order for Superman to fit in without his costume. Put differently, Superman is not Clark Kent's secret, Clark Kent is Superman's secret.

⁵⁶ Time Warner sales of the Guy Fawkes were about 100,000 a year [as of 2011] and out sell any other mask from a film by far. (Bilton, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/29/technology/masked-anonymous-protesters-aid-time-warners-profits.html? r=0>.)

those who engage in illegal and subversive acts (hactivism tactics are still illegal/graffiti is still illegal) and with the rise of a surveillance society and the over use of Glomar response when it comes to state secrecy and state spying, the masks may becoming revolutionary in that they are ever more necessary.

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